

**MY CAREER STORY:  
AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WORKBOOK FOR LIFE-CAREER  
SUCCESS**

Paul J. Hartung  
Department of Family and Community Medicine  
Northeast Ohio Medical University  
Rootstown, Ohio  
U.S.A

Paper prepared for presentation at the annual meeting of the National Career Development Association. June 21-23, 2012. Atlanta, GA. Address all correspondence about this paper to [phartung@neomed.edu](mailto:phartung@neomed.edu). Portions of this paper adapted from a chapter by P. J. Hartung entitled "Career as story: Making the narrative turn" to appear in W. B. Walsh, M. L. Savickas, & P. J. Hartung (Eds.) *Handbook of vocational psychology* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). NY: Routledge.

*We have each of us, a life story, an inner narrative – whose continuity,  
whose sense, is our lives.*  
Oliver Sacks (1985, pp. 105-106)

## **INTRODUCTION**

Human life lives in story. Everyone has a story to tell and most of us want desperately to tell it. Story surrounds us as we tell our own stories, listen to those of other people, and construct them as "we *become* the autobiographical narratives by which we 'tell about' our lives" (Bruner, 1987, p.14). Our autobiographical narratives, or narrative identities (Ricoeur, 1986), convey who we are. And "when we want someone to know who we really are, we tell them our life story" (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 29). In this paper, I consider the growing use of story and the narrative paradigm in career intervention. I then explain a narrative career intervention workbook for guided self-reflection to increase ability to tell and perform one's own life story in work and career.

## **Narrative: A Third Wave of Career Intervention**

Recognizing the power and prevalence of story in human life, career counselors increasingly use narrative models and methods in practice (e.g., see Maree, 2007; Savickas, 2011; Whiston & Rahardja, 2005). In so doing, they move into a new, third wave of career intervention. The first wave concerned matching people to jobs in a *psychology of occupations* initiated in the early 1900s and epitomized by Holland's (1997) RIASEC approach. The second wave concentrated on managing worker and other life roles over the life span in a *psychology of careers* launched at mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and epitomized by Super's (1990) life-span, life-space approach. The third wave now focuses on making meaning through work in a *psychology of life designing* introduced at the end of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and epitomized by Savickas' (2011) career construction approach. Each wave, from occupations to careers to life design, crests and joins with the next adding to the sea of available guidance, education, and counseling models and methods. These three waves reflect three larger movements from, respectively, *mechanism* and a focus on traits, to *organicism* and a focus on developmental stages, to *contextualism* and a focus on narratives (Sarbin, 1986). Combined, "if dispositional traits [individual differences] sketch the outline and characteristic adaptations [individual development] fill in the details of human individuality, then narrative identities [individual design] give individual lives their unique and culturally anchored meanings" (McAdams & Pals, 2006, p. 210).

By turning to narrative models and methods, career counselors aim to deliver career interventions that better account for the dynamic, diverse, and uniquely patterned nature of human life within a rearranged structure of work. The ability of story to capture life's richness and complexity now draws many career counselors to use narrative methods to assist people to construct and design their lives. Compelling forces of economic, occupational, and organizational instability along with personal insecurity about work and career attendant life in the digital age accelerate this use. Today, we seem to find ourselves increasingly seeking security in the blankets of our own life stories rather than in those comforts previously offered by acting as a lasting character in a once-stable organization's story. The capricious, unsteady, equivocal, and discontinuous nature of work and workplaces in contemporary life prompts an intensified search for meaning (Dik, Byrne, & Steger, in press). Meanwhile, the digital age presents the paradox of unparalleled interconnectivity alongside mounting isolation as

the demands of making a living and living a life often stretch us beyond our families, communities, and other familiar contexts.

Using narrative career interventions recognizes people as holistic, self-organizing, and active constructors and shapers of their lives through work, family, play, and other elements of human experience. It remains an individual's story that "has the power to tie together past, present, and future in his or her life. It is story which is able to provide unity and purpose ... The story is the answer to the questions, 'Who am I?' and 'How do I fit into an adult world?'" (McAdams, 1985, p. 18). Augmenting the prevailing views on careers in objective terms of *traits* indicated by test scores that suit occupations and in subjective terms of *tasks* to master in developing a career, the narrative perspective conceives of work as a vehicle we may use to advance our life projects and life *themes* (Savickas, 2011).

### **A Workbook for Narrative Career Intervention**

Career construction counseling entails an interpersonal process of helping people design their lives through work and career (Savickas, 2011). The approach applies constructionist principles and narrative practices to career counseling. To expand its reach and offer counselors supplementary materials for use in career construction counseling, the My Career Story workbook (MCS; Savickas & Hartung, 2012) was developed. Research suggests that workbooks like the MCS offer an effective means of career intervention to improve career planning and choice (Brown et al., 2003). The MCS was designed to augment and simulate essential elements of career construction counseling. Using guided self-reflection, the MCS specifically aims to increase narrative identity and intentionality. Narrative identity means the ability to coherently tell one's own life story. Intentionality means the ability to meaningfully perform one's own life story in work and other domains such as family and community. The MCS applies career construction counseling principles to helping people make choices about current life-career transitions and future career directions. The MCS follows a rationale based in career construction theory and practice (Savickas, 2011, 2013), offers use in diverse settings, and includes content that assists users to tell, hear, and perform their life-career stories.

**Rationale.** People often need help planning and deciding about their career paths. Such help includes figuring out what kind of work they

might want to do and how to go about doing it. It also includes planning and feeling in control of their futures, exploring possible careers, and building confidence to do what they want to do and solve problems that might get in the way. Most people need this help because they are facing a change in their life; like going from high school to college, from school to work, or from one job to the next. And change means making choices.

Sometimes taking tests can be helpful to learn about what kinds of jobs and occupations a person may like and to make choices. Counselors often use these tests to help with *matching* clients to jobs that seem right for them. Usually, career tests tell about individuals' work-related interests, abilities, and personality. They tell about what kinds of people clients most resemble and what kinds of jobs people like them most often do. While often helpful for identifying college majors or occupations that might fit them best, such tests usually tell just one part of the whole life story. To understand themselves more completely and how they can use work to be the person they want to be, it may help for clients to think about their whole life story. Knowing and telling one's own life story, or autobiography, adds *meaning* to career plans and choices. It can also deepen life-career planning and decision making with a clearer sense of direction and purpose.

We make ourselves and our worlds through the stories we tell. To best achieve life-career success, we must create a story about ourselves that expresses very clearly who we are as a person, where we most like to be in the work world, and how we want to use work in a way that best allows us to fully be ourselves. To construct such a story, it may help to think of a life-career as an ongoing tale with three main parts: a lead character or *self* that represents who we are, an educational or work *setting* where we feel most comfortable, and a *script* with a plot and a central theme that explains and shows us how to use work in a way to best realize the self we have constructed.

The MCS aims to help people tell, hear, and author their own life stories. Think of the MCS as a mirror we may hold up to look at ourselves. By looking closely in this "mirror," we can reflect on how we may use school and work in a way that is meaningful to us and that matters to other people. Telling, hearing, and co-constructing our own story with valued audiences, such as a counselor, coach, mentor, family member, or friend, empowers us to author our own life-careers and experience work satisfaction.

**Use.** Individuals, groups, and educators may use the MCS for guided self-reflection to increase narrative identity and intentionality in career planning, career choice, and work adjustment. Counselors may assign the workbook to clients and discuss the results with them. In groups, individuals may engage group members as an audience to help them tell and enact their stories. Teachers may use the workbook as the syllabus for a high school or college career orientation/education course. A summary of possible uses of the MCS includes:

- **Individuals:** Use the MCS individually to tell, hear, and retell with greater clarity your own life-career story, and identify ways to enact that story in work. Doing so can help you better understand how you want to use work in a way that allows you to become the person you want to be.
- **Groups:** Use the MCS in group settings to tell, hear, and retell with greater clarity group members' own life-career stories. Individual group members engage the group as an audience to listen to and help them tell and enact their stories. In turn, they provide an audience for other group members as they listen to and reflect on other members' stories.
- **Educators:** Use the MCS as the syllabus or an activity for a high school or college career orientation/education course to increase students' ability to tell, hear, and retell with greater clarity and comprehension their emerging life-career stories and enact those stories in school and work.

**Content.** The MCS contains a series of questions designed to tell the life story and reveal the life theme. The life theme is then related to a career problem currently faced, such as deciding about educational and occupational options and making career plans. Reflecting on the answers to the questions promotes narratability and intentionality.

The MCS contains three parts. **Part I, "Telling My Story,"** involves answering four key questions taken from the Career Construction Interview (Savickas, 2011). These questions elicit small stories about self, setting, script, and self-advice. The answers to each question tell one part of the whole life-career story. The first question asks about role models, or

heroes and heroines admired as a child to elicit stories that reveal the template used for constructing a *self* and determining how life should be lived successfully. The second question asks about favorite magazines and TV shows that provide vicarious environments, or *settings* in which individuals immerse themselves. The third question elicits a favorite story in the form of a book or movie that attracts a person's attention because it has a plot that resembles her or his own principal problem, preoccupation, and pain. The person feels drawn to the story because it offers a life *script* for successfully dealing with a core problem and a central character who constitutes an ideal self. The fourth question asks about a favorite saying that represents *self-advice* in the form of the best counsel one has for dealing with life's problems. Favorite sayings or mottos remind people how to deal with their problems and become more complete.

**Part II, "Hearing My Story,"** uses the answers from Part I to tell the career story with greater clarity and comprehension. This process aims to promote understanding of self, preferred settings, a life script, and self-advice. Together, the story told in Part I and the portrait constructed in Part II aim to increase narrative identity, or *who* individuals are as the lead characters in their own life-career stories, *where* in the world of work they would most like to be who they are, and *what* they believe it will take to connect self to possible work settings. Users then shape the themes and patterns culled from these micro-stories into a macro-narrative about the core problem or preoccupation, motives, goals, adaptive strategies, and self-view. This re-construction process empowers authorship of the life-career story and enhances the potential for experiencing work as a personally meaningful context for development and a socially relevant endeavor.

**Part III, "Enacting My Story,"** involves constructing a formula for success and making a realistic plan to put the story into action. This plan involves reflecting on, telling, and performing the story. Reflecting on the career story leads to setting goals for the next chapter of the life-career. Telling and talking about the career story and the conclusions drawn from the workbook with valued audiences promotes making it more real and clear and feeling more confident in living it. Audiences might be family members, friends, mentors, coaches, and teachers. Performing the story by identifying specific action to take increases exploration, commitment, and goal attainment.

## CONCLUSION

Career counselors increasingly use narrative career intervention methods to better account for and attend to the complexity of work in people's lives. Narrative methods may better empower people with the capability and confidence to create the inner stability needed to navigate through today's turbulent times. The My Career Story workbook aims to help clients tell, hear, and enact their own life-career stories in terms of who they are, where in the world of work they would like to be, and what they think it will take to connect themselves to occupations they may like. Because it contains written exercises and goal setting activities identified as critical to successful career planning (Brown et al., 2003), the MCS may prove especially useful for life-career design in the digital age.

### References

- Brown, S. D. et al. (2003). Critical ingredients of career choice interventions: More analyses and new hypotheses. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 62, 411-428
- Bruner, J. (1987). Life as narrative. *Social Research*, 54, 11-32.
- Dik, B., Byrne, Z. & Steger, M. (Eds.). (2013). *Purpose and Meaning in the Workplace*. Washington, DC: APA Books.
- Holland, J. L. (1997). *Making vocational choices* (3rd ed.). Odessa, FL: Psychological Assessment Resources.
- Maree, J. G. (Ed.). (2007). *Shaping the story: A guide to facilitating narrative counselling*. Pretoria, South Africa: Van Schaik Publishers.
- McAdams, D. P. (1985). *Power, intimacy, and the life story: Personological inquiries into identity*. New York: Guilford Press.
- McAdams, D. P. & Pals, J. L. (2006). A new big five: Fundamental principles for an integrative science of personality. *American Psychologist*, 61, 204-217.
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (1988). *Narrative knowing and the human sciences*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Ricoeur, P. (1986). Life: A story in search of a narrator. In M. Doerer & J. Kray (Eds.), *Facts and values: Philosophical reflections from western and non-western perspectives* (pp. 34-68). Dordrecht: Nijhoff.
- Sarbin, T. R. (Ed.). (1986a). The narrative as a root metaphor for psychology. In T. R. Sarbin (Ed.), *Narrative psychology: The storied nature of human conduct* (pp. 3-21). New York, NY: Praeger Scientific.
- Savickas, M. L. (2013). Career construction theory and practice. In R. W. Lent & S. D. Brown (Eds.) *Career development and counseling: Putting theory and research to work* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; pp. 147-183). Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons.
- Savickas, M. L. (2011). *Career counseling*. Washington, D. C.: American Psychological Association Books, Inc.
- Savickas, M. L., & Hartung, p. J. (2012). *My career story: An autobiographical workbook for life-career success*. [www.vocopher.com](http://www.vocopher.com).
- Super, D. E. (1990). A life-span, life-space approach to career development. In D. Brown & L. Brooks (Eds.), *Career choice and development: Applying contemporary theories to practice* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., pp. 197-261). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Whiston, S. C., & Rahardja, D. (2005). Qualitative career assessment: An overview and analysis. *Journal of Career Assessment*, 13, 371-380.